

WORKING IT OUT WITH WOLVES

How Montanans are learning to live with the state's gray wolf population—and training the wild canids to live with Montanans

BY TOM DICKSON

Tourists leaving Yellowstone National Park on U.S. Highway 89 can easily see Bruce Malcolm's cattle grazing along the west slope of Paradise Valley, 20 miles north of Gardiner. Unfortunately, so can an increasing number of wolves leaving the park, where the controversial canines were reintroduced a decade ago.

"The first calf we lost was in 1999," says Malcolm, a semi-retired rancher and state representative for a legislative district encompassing 4,000 square miles of mostly federal forest and private livestock operations. "We were at our cabin up on the summer range, and the cows were acting strange, crowding around the yard. The next morning my daughter went riding before work to see if she could find her calf. All that was left was the skull cap and ear tag."

Malcolm can't be 100 percent certain it was a wolf. But he knows wolves will kill calves and that wolves have been nearby. "Every fresh snow we see fresh tracks right down there in the driveway," he says. "Wolves aren't afraid to come onto the property."

For Malcolm and many other citizens, Montana is a different place now that wolves are back. Raising livestock is more challenging. Hunters wonder if deer and elk herds can hold up in the face of wolf predation. Rural residents worry about their safety. Wolf advocates and others welcome the renewed biodiversity wolves bring to the region.

"We know there's a wide range of interests out there regarding wolves," says Jeff Hagener, director of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "Our job is to manage wolves on the Montana landscape using the best science available, while at the same time responding to the diverse concerns of people who live, work, and recreate in wolf range."

RETURN OF A NATIVE

When European immigrants moved west, they found a region full of wolves. In 1843, while exploring the Missouri River near today's North Dakota-Montana border, John James Audubon wrote that the predators were "extremely abundant" and recorded seeing more than two dozen wolves some days. When their natural foods—bison, deer, and elk—were nearly eliminated in the late 19th century by market hunting and replaced with sheep and cattle, wolves began preying on livestock. Ranchers and government agencies responded by aggressively poisoning, trapping, and shooting the predators. By the 1930s, only occasional nomads from Canada were left.

In the early 1970s, when the public sensed that wolves might disappear from the lower 48 states altogether, the species became one of the first to be shielded by the Endangered Species Act. Wolves began naturally recolonizing northern



DIANE HARGREAVES

MIXED WELCOME

Wolves began moving back into Montana in the 1980s from Glacier National Park and more recently from Yellowstone National Park. Some Montanans and businesses welcome the new arrivals; others wish the wild canids had stayed put. But most people have come to terms with the fact that wolves are here for good. The question now, as one rancher put it: "How are we going to live with each other?"



JEFF HENRY/ROCHE JAUNE PICTURES



JUDY WANTULOK

Montana from British Columbia in 1979. By the mid-1980s, a few packs anchored western Glacier National Park and established new packs from there. The 126 wolves now spread across northwestern Montana are classified as federally “endangered.”

Roughly 130 wolves in Montana’s southern “experimental” area range from Lolo southeast to Red Lodge. They descended from the original 66 wolves reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996. The controversial reintroduction came after Congress directed the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to recover wolves in what was considered the best remaining habitat in the lower 48 states.

Watching wolf numbers grow and distribution expand, Montana officials knew the population would soon reach federal recovery goals. To meet federal delisting requirements, the state formed a wolf advisory council of ranchers, outfitters, wolf advocates, and other Montana citizens to map out a state management plan. After hosting public meetings statewide and reviewing roughly 10,000 public comments, FWP finished the plan in 2003. The USFWS almost immediately approved the plan, which outlines how Montana aims to fit wolves into a landscape

where people live and work, while ensuring the population never falls below 10 breeding pairs—Montana’s minimum share of a viable Northern Rockies population.

The USFWS also approved Idaho’s plan, but it rejected Wyoming’s due to a provision that would allow unlimited numbers of wolves to be killed in most of that state. Because wolves in all three Northern Rockies states are considered a single population, the federal agency has stalled delisting. However, the agency agreed in 2005 to transfer wolf management responsibility to Montana and Idaho. The federal government is currently paying for both states’ management activities.

“The agreement is a major step for Montana,” says Hagener. “It recognizes that wolves are recovered here, and it begins the transition to long-term conservation.”

As part of the agreement, FWP has begun carrying out much of the state’s wolf plan. Five wolf management specialists across western and south-central Montana monitor the wolf population by documenting pack locations and, when appropriate, tracking individual radio-collared animals. The specialists record pack sizes, reproduction, and survival and note which livestock producers might

be affected by wolves.

Last year FWP created a web page where people can report wolf sightings. “We combine that information with aerial, track, and howling survey information to paint a picture of where Montana wolves are and what they are doing,” says Carolyn Sime, coordinator of FWP’s Wolf Conservation and Management Program. The department also provides information on wolves on its website and at dozens of presentations given throughout the year.

Though Montana now manages the state’s wolves, the species remains on the federal list of threatened and endangered species. For now, federal regulations still apply to how landowners may respond to wolves. Those regulations differ depending on where in the state wolves are, a bone of contention with many Montanans.

On private land in the southern “experimental” area (see map, left), landowners or their employees may, under certain conditions, chase off or even kill a wolf that is harassing or attacking livestock or domestic dogs. However, in northern Montana, where wolves are classified as endangered, private citizens cannot haze or kill wolves to protect livestock or dogs.

PERSPECTIVES DIFFER

By tracking pack locations in both areas, FWP biologists have learned that many wolves move past livestock unnoticed. “Wolves walk by cattle and sheep everyday in much of western Montana,” says Sime. She adds, however, that some wolves do learn to prey on sheep and cattle. “And for the individual ranchers who lose livestock, it’s a very real problem.”

How much of a problem is a matter of perspective. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Montana livestock operators reported losing 66,000 cattle last year to disease, birthing difficulties, accidents, and other causes. Of the 3,000 cattle reportedly killed by predators, including coyotes, dogs, mountain lions, and bears, USDA Wildlife Services last year confirmed 23 wolf kills. The actual number is likely several times higher because many calves are never recovered or the cause of death cannot be verified.

“Even if the wolf kill is five times higher

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

than what is officially confirmed, that’s still a miniscule percentage of the overall cattle losses,” says Michael Garrity, executive director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies.

Yet many ranchers maintain that the loss of even a single cow cuts into their bottom line. “We’re a small, family-run operation,” says Bill Brownlee, who ranches in the Boulder River Valley about 10 miles south of Big Timber. “We can’t absorb many losses.” He and other ranchers believes wolves also stress

cattle, causing weight loss and miscarriages.

Nevertheless, most livestock operators concede that the predators are back in Montana permanently. “Like it or not,” says Malcolm, “wolves are here to stay.”

DECREASING RISK

Recognizing the inevitable, many ranchers are working with FWP and private conservation organizations to decrease depredation risk. Last year, Brownlee and other ranchers in the

Boulder River Valley teamed up with the USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service and the Bozeman-based Predator Conservation Alliance. The partners hired three riders to patrol cattle herds throughout the valley from April through October.

Other sheep and cattle ranchers use electric fence, guard dogs, fladry (fence flagging), and sirens to deter wolves and other predators. FWP provides cracker shells and rubber bullets. Such measures help wolves steer clear

WOLVES AND WILD UNGULATES

Now that wolves are reestablished in Montana, hunters, biologists, and others are trying to understand the extent to which the predators affect deer and elk populations.

“So far we’ve found that impacts vary depending on the location and density of wolves,” says Jeff Herbert, assistant chief of the FWP Wildlife Division. “In some localized places, wolves are definitely having an impact on deer and elk. But in other areas, especially where wolf densities are low, the effects aren’t really noticeable.”

Herbert says weather, habitat conditions, hunting harvest, and other predators (mountain lions and bears) are the main factors biologists consider, along with wolves, when determining what causes herd size and structure to change.

“We know that wolf predation by itself usually does not initiate declines in prey populations,” Herbert says. “But in some cases, it can worsen declines or lengthen the time it takes a prey population to rebound.” Not in all cases, however. In northwestern Montana, white-tailed deer numbers have rebounded from the brutal winter of 1996–97, despite the presence of wolves.

In southwestern Montana around Yellowstone National Park, the effects of wolves on elk appear mixed. In recent years, the upper Gallatin and northern Yellowstone elk herds have declined markedly. Since its historic peak of more than 19,000 in the mid-1990s, the northern Yellowstone herd is down to an estimated 10,000 today, smaller than at any time since the early 1970s.

One reason the northern Yellowstone and upper Gallatin herds are seeing greater wolf predation is that they spend at least half of each year inside the national park boundaries, where wolf and other predator densities are higher. “In agricultural areas outside the park,” says Herbert, “wolf density is lower because lethal wolf control is being used to resolve conflicts with livestock. That buffers elk from high rates of wolf predation.”

Calf survival for northern Yellowstone elk is down significantly. National Park researchers recently found that increased early season predation is due to the park’s growing number of grizzly bears, which key on newborn calves. They also found that wolves prey on calves



CARNIVOROUS CANINES It’s true wolves eat elk and deer. But to what effect?

(and adults) later in the year.

Other elk populations in the region remain stable or have increased, even though wolves are present. “In the Gravelly Mountains and the Madison Basin, elk are still well above our population objectives,” says Herbert.

Herbert adds that FWP still has a lot to learn about predator-prey interactions and the long-term implications for wolves and all species that wolves affect. The department continues to conduct research, in cooperation with Montana State University and other organizations, on the relationships between wolves and elk. FWP has also increased elk population monitoring in much of the state’s wolf range and is more closely monitoring populations of other ungulates such as moose. Other biologists have begun studying relationships between wolves and other predators.

“The more information we gather on how wolves interact with ungulates and other wildlife in the agricultural landscape, the better we’ll be able to craft responsible and sustainable wolf harvest regulations in the future,” Herbert says.

To learn more about wolves and big game, including the latest research findings on wolf-elk relationships, visit fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf/game.html.

Two interim federal wolf management areas



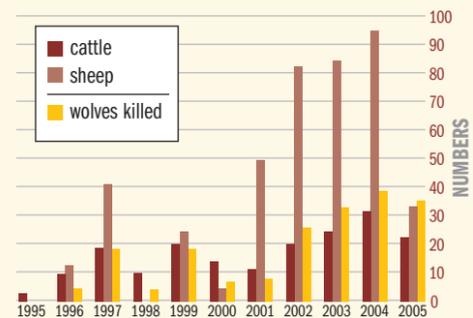
Montana wolves are still divided into two different federal classifications, with different regulations. On private land in southern Montana, where wolves are classified as “experimental,” landowners or their employees may, under certain conditions, chase off or even kill wolves caught harassing or attacking livestock or domestic dogs. However, in the northern “endangered” area, private citizens may not haze or kill wolves to protect livestock or domestic dogs.

NOTE: For specific regulations relating to wolves in the two federal classification areas, visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf/livestock.html.



DIANE HARGREAVES

CONFIRMED DEPREDAATION LOSSES TO WOLVES
(The actual number is likely several times higher, because dead livestock sometimes can't be found or the cause of death can't be confirmed.)



MONTANA OUTDOORS. SOURCE: USDA AND FWP

TWO-WAY EDUCATION “We shouldn’t have to learn how to live with wolves,” says one Montana sheep rancher. “Wolves should have to learn to live with us.” In fact, both is occurring. With the help of FWP wolf management specialists, livestock operators are finding new ways to keep their cattle and sheep away from wolves, as well as discouraging wolves from going after livestock. (At right, wolf specialist Jon Trapp, standing, helps install fladry, which flaps in the wind and discourages wolves from passing through fencing.) Wolves that don’t learn their lesson may pay the ultimate price: In recent years, the number of wolves killed because of livestock depredation has exceeded the number of confirmed cattle killed by wolves.



MONTANA FWP

Wolves that don’t learn their lesson may pay the ultimate price....

of humans and livestock.

“Nothing is 100 percent effective,” says Sime. “The trick is to find ways to discourage wolves from killing livestock in the first place. We work with producers to find tools that work best for them.”

Some wolves learn bad habits that are hard to break. Those that continue hunting and killing livestock often have to be killed.

Unlike coyote losses, ranchers can be reimbursed for wolf depredation. The environmental group Defenders of Wildlife pays 100 percent of fair market value for confirmed wolf kills and 50 percent for probable kills. However, some ranchers think the group’s verification process is too strict, and others don’t like taking money from what they consider an adversary.

Defenders of Wildlife may end its private compensation program once wolves are delisted. A committee of Montana ranchers, wolf advocates, and public agency representatives recently sketched out a new reimbursement program that would use federal

and private funding to pay for prevention tools and reimburse verified losses. Most ranchers say that even though reimbursement can fall short of the true costs, it takes some of the pain out of raising livestock in what has again become wolf country.

JUST ANOTHER CRITTER

Though wolves inspire both fear and reverence, biologists point out that the wild canid is just another wildlife species. FWP has begun managing them that way, by monitoring populations, conducting research, and eventually, according to Montana’s wolf management plan, providing regulated hunting seasons. Regulated harvest is a tool that could help balance wolf numbers with private property damage, concerns about human safety, prey populations, and public acceptance of large carnivores.

The mountain lion is an example. For most of the state’s history, the large cat could be shot on sight and cashed in for bounty. When the mountain lion was protected as a

big game animal under state law in 1971, FWP began regulating lion mortality under a hunting quota system. With regulated hunting, the mountain lion population has improved to the point where both hunters and predator advocates now publicly support the cat’s conservation.

“It’s hard for some people to understand that Montana’s cougar population has benefited from being managed as a big game animal, but it’s true” says Sime. “We think it could be the same for wolves.”

Some people, however, aren’t sure full state management authority would be in wolves’ best interests. In addition to concerns over Wyoming’s management plan and its legislature’s anti-wolf rhetoric, wolf supporters were alarmed when Idaho recently proposed killing up to 80 percent of the wolves near the Montana border, alleging the predators are depressing the local elk population.

“The states don’t have a good track record of dealing with endangered species,” says Garrity of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies.

“They’re still under intense political pressure from hunters and ranchers to eradicate wolves, just like they were 100 years ago.”

Hagener insists Montana can be trusted to ensure the long-term health of its wolf population. “Montana’s wolf program balances conflicting viewpoints and has strong and diverse statewide support,” he says. “We have a solid reputation of effectively managing large carnivores and conserving their populations.”

Montana officials continue to strongly urge the USFWS to delist wolves in Montana and any other state that has a federally approved wolf management plan.

“We shouldn’t be held hostage by Wyoming’s stubbornness,” Hagener says.

SURVIVORS, ALL

Meanwhile, the ever-pragmatic Montana ranchers continue to figure out how best to live with wolves. Brownlee says his primary goal is to keep his operation afloat. “I have two young kids, and I want them to be able to stay in the ranching business if they want to,” he says.

To that end, the rancher has been doing things he never dreamed of. Last fall Brownlee and other ranchers celebrated the first season of the three-year range rider project they’d developed with the Predator Conservation Alliance.

“Their [the PCA’s] board of directors was in town that weekend, so we invited them to our get-together,” Brownlee says. “At one point I really couldn’t believe it was happening, but there we were, having dinner in the Legion Hall in Big Timber, all of us get-

MANAGING THE BIG PICTURE Though state wildlife officials are still learning about wolves and the predator’s relationship with elk, deer, and other wildlife, they say one thing is certain: If critical Montana habitat continues to be lost to overdevelopment, there will be fewer places for all wildlife to live.

“The department continues to focus on conserving prime elk and deer habitat by purchasing conservation easements and encouraging the use of managed grazing systems,” says FWP director Jeff Hagener. “If we don’t have good winter range and other habitat, we won’t have deer and elk, and that means we won’t have wolves, either.”

ting to know one another.”

The rancher acknowledges that ten years ago he would have fought the wolf advocates tooth and nail. “But nowadays it makes more sense to sit down at a table and work things out,” he says.

Brownlee points out that ranchers have always adapted to change. “We adapt to changing weather, we adapt to changing markets, and now we’re adapting to wolves.”

The 2005 Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Annual Report contains additional information about ongoing wolf management, including summaries of the state’s verified wolf packs. To read the report and other wolf-related information, including details of regulations in the state’s two federal wolf areas, visit fwp.mt.gov. For USFWS information on Northern Rockies wolves, go to <http://westerngraywolf.fws.gov>.



CAROL POLICH